Interview with Mrs. A.

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["GROWTH?] OF BRIDGEPORT"

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INTERVIEW WITH MRS. A., CLINTON AVENUE SURVEY.

The writers interviewed a resident of one, of the ramshaklye ramshackle six-family tenements on lower Clinton Avenue. We knocked at the door of one of the two downstair flats. A woman of about thirty two (probably younger) opened the door. We began explaining our reasons for being there, but she interrupted us to say, "Won't you please come in." We stepped into a small, dark living room (about 10 by 10). Along the wall there was an old couch with a faded tan cover, on which a small boy was lying. Despite our protests, the mother insisted that he get up, saying, "Give the ladies a seat." She explained to us that he had a cold and that she had kept him out of school for the day. A little girl, of about three years, came in from the bedroom, sniveling. "She's got a cold, too," her mother said. "The baby," she continued, pointing to a rocker in the corner where the child was being violently rocked by Mrs. A's young sister, "has been sick off and on, now, for three weeks. She has a fever one day, and the next day it goes, and then comes back again. If she don't get better soon, I'll have to call the doctor. She's cutting teeth now, too. That make her worse."

The room in which we were sitting was furnished with one straight back chair, a rocker of the old type, a player piano - somewhat battered - and with rolls stacked on top, and a round fragile table in the center of the floor. Between the two windows , stood a cabinet radio - an old type. The floor was covered by the most threadbare carpet we have ever seen. On the table had been placed a lamp which was connected to the electric socket suspended from the ceiling directly above it. Stringy curtains hung dankly at the windows. There was no color in the room; the wallpaper was dark, with large pattern. It was soiled, and torn in several places. The woodwork, once green, had been painted with thin coats of gray.

The woman told us that she had four rooms. From where we were sitting, we could see that it was a Railroad flat. The bedroom, which led 2 off the living room, had but one window, and was just large enough to hold a double bed, a bureau, and a baby's crib. A bright linoleum covered the floor. This room and the kitchen, also visible from the living room, were clean and neat. The kitchen was bright and more cheerful than the other two rooms. It had been painted bright green and buff. An old type washing machine stood in the corner. Mrs. A. told us that there was a small bed-room in the [rear?]; this we did not see. She also told us that each family had its own toilet in the hall. We asked her if there was a bath in the flat, and she replied somewhat [ruefully?], “No such luck around here.”

“I pay thirteen dollars a month for this — or rather, the city pays it now —you see, I'm on city relief. we've been off and on relief for the past six years. My husband is on the sick list — he was on W.P.A. but he couldn't work. He has high blood pressure and nerves. He works next door, at the Beacon Grill — cleaning up every morning, for about two hours. He gets two dollars a week. Before we were married he used to work at [Sassick's?]; since then he's done odd jobs, but he can't do much cause he's sick. He gets attacks about twice a month. When he does you can't hold him — it's his nerves. He'll beat his head against the wall. It started six years ago with headaches. The doctor said he has a brain clot. When he gets sick, I pour cold water on his head so the blood will go down. He could

be operated on, but the doctor says there's one chance in a hundred. My husband would rather go along this way. You see, he's blind in one eye, and the operation might make him lose the other. The doctor told us about a hospital — they call it an institution, where they keep them in cold baths. They have men taking care of them, because the nurses can't hold them down. They're afraid. I'm not afraid of my own man when he gets that way. I used to be, but not now. I got used to it. What can you do? You have to get used to it. The last time my husband got sick, he was so bad I called the doctor — my parish preist priest paid for it. I didn't have no money to pay for a doctor." She spoke in a straight forward manner, with no self pity or complaint.

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In addition to the rent, she told us that the city paid for gas and electricity, and supplied coal and wood. "They don't have to give us much wood — my husband helps the man upstairs bring in his wood, and he gives us some. I got clothing for the kids, milk, bread, and a food basket."

We asked whether she received any money from the city. She said, "No, just food. The deliver my box, and bread and milk. My husband used to go for it, but the last time he went he got sick, and they had to bring him home. I got sixteen breads a week — it's day old bread; three quarts of milk a day; two pounds of butter a week; one and a half dozen eggs a week; two and a half pounds of sugar; a dozen oranges; four pounds apples; a peck of potatoes; five cans of tomatoes — sometimes four — we're supposed to get five. Every two weeks I get a pound of bacon and a pound of cheese — regular store cheese. Lard I get once in a while — never any special time; flour, too — not regularly. Sometimes a big bag — sometimes a little one. I bake for the children — I make them cakes and cookies — they like that. I get a four pound bag of salt about once every six months. I never get pepper once since I've been on the city. Well, I s'pose they figure it only costs five cents and you can buy it."

We asked if she got any fresh vegetables. She shook her head. “No, nothin' like that. I do get a meat check for 90¢ every week. You get the same things all the time. You can't complain.”

Mrs. A. told us she had come to Bridgeport nine years ago from Fall River, Massachusetts. She was born there, of French Canadian parents. Her husband, also French-Canadian, had done to the city from Lowell, Mass. Asked why she came to Bridgeport, she said, “Well, my brother came here first, and wrote us there were lots of jobs here. So my sister and I came down first, and then the rest of the family came. In Fall River, I worked in the cotton mills — on the [looms?]. Now a lot the mills have moved out of Fall River and Lawrence. They're 4 charging too much taxes, I guess. That's why the mills have to move out. My first job in Bridgeport was at the Bryant Electric. I worked there one month, and then I left. Why? You see, I'm stubborn. There were five girls on the job. They couldn't make out — it was piece work, and the prices were out. We were only making $12. My cousin used to work on that job and made $17.50. I could have made out — I was a fast worker, but I wouldn't [scab?] the job. The foreman offered to put me on another machine, but I said ‘No, you'll keep me here a couple of weeks and then fire me.’ So I walked out. I didn't lose any time — I went right to [Hubbell?] in the Switch Department. Sometimes I worked piece work — but mostly day work. I made twelve dollars a week. The job didn't pay much, but it was satisfying. I worked forty-eight hours a week — sometimes fifty four, but we didn't get any overtime pay. I got married, and in between the babies I went back to Hubbell's. The last time I worked there was a year and a half ago — but I had to give up because of this one.” She pointed to the youngest child.

We asked her if she would go back to work if she could find a job, and she answered, “No, I can't leave the children, and I have to take care of my sick husband.”

She told us she had been married seven and a half years; she has four children, ages ranging from eighteen months to seven years. The two oldest boys are in school.

“My husband worked in [Sassick's?] before we were married; a year after we got married he got sick. Girls are funny, you know — they get married, and they don't know what's going to happen. A frien of mine got married a little while ago, and a month after her husband lost his job. They didn't know.”

Mrs. A. told us the hose was owned by Peter Abromaitis, who owns the next door, six family tenement, and a twelve family tenement on Railroad Avenue. “He comes down from New York once a week to collect rents. This house is in such a wreck as it is, but he won't do anything. Just this morning I went through the toilet floor — the high heel on my bedroom slippers 5 went right through the rotten boards. I told Abromaitis that he wouldn't get away with it with me, like he did with Mrs. Meyers upstairs. She fell off the back porch three months ago, and died a few weeks later. She suffered terrible. The rail gave way, and she fell twelve feet. They said it was an accident, and wasn't the landlord's fault — a car had hit the post and weakened the porch. But she didn't know — she just went out to hang her clothes. The landlord should have fixed it. Everything here is coming apart. Even the walls are falling down. You know there isn't one rent that pays the same in these two houses. I pay thirteen — some pay [?] fourteen, some pay more. Abromaitis wanted to raise my rent to fourteen, but I told him ‘You won't get more for this dump — I won't pay it, and I know the city won't — they'd be foolish if they did.’ I told him, ‘You wouldn't live in this house. Why don't you have your wife come and spend a couple of weeks in this house, and see [hownshe'd?] like it’. He's cleaned this place just once in three years. He gave us the paper and paint for this room, and my husband did the work — and he didn't pay us for doing it, either.” She pointed behind the piano. “We didn't have enough to paper behind there. The landlord wouldn't buy any more paper — and we didn't want to put something different on.”

She told us that her two children attended Saint Anthony's [Parochial?] School. “That's Father Jalbert's parish. The school is growing — there are eight grades now, and they have about forty benches in each class. You pay fifty cents a year for the first grade —

that's for paper, pencils, and books too. You pay if you can. It's a dollar or a dollar and a half in the higher grades. I paid fifty cents for my boy last year, but I can't pay anything this year. They teach them French in school — and I speak French to the children at home. They don't like to speak it because the other children they play with don't speak it. But I don't answer them if they speak English to me. That's how I keep the children in trim with it."

We asked her about her neighbors. "Four out of the six families in this house are on relief. In the next house, four are on relief, and 6 one family is on half relief — half work. Across the street / is a Hungarian family — the woman is a widow, and the boy just got back from a CC camp. There are quite a few French Canadians on this street, and Roumanians, and Ruthenians, and all like that. I have friends along the street, and in the East end. I meet them in the stores — not to say visiting so much; they all have large families and are pretty busy. I don't get out much. Once in a while I go to a show — not down town — it costs too much. Up here you can take in a show for ten or fifteen cents. When I go out my husband takes care of the kids. I go to Baby Showers — I try to keep up with them, even if I can only bring something for twenty-five cents. I know that if I do that, when my turn comes next, they'll help me. We[?] have some English women, and all kinds, but mostly French."

It was getting late. As we were ready to leave, we noticed an instrument on the piano, and enquired about it. It was a [concertina?]. She took it down. "My husband plays it — he can play the piano, too. He learnt by himself. I don't know how to play it." She showed us to the door. "I hope you get what you're looking for", she said graciously.

The children were very well behaved during the interview. They were pale - faced, neatly dressed in patched, laundry faded clothes.

([Addition?]: There was no hot water facilities in this apartment. The flat is heated by the kitchen stove. In extreme weather, a small single burner kerosene stove is used in the living room. Oil for this stove, is bought by Mrs. A.)